de genere

Rivista di studi letterari, postcoloniali e di genere
Journal of Literary, Postcolonial and Gender Studies

http://www.degenere-journal.it/

ISSN 2465-2415

Decolonizing Sex: Ranjana Khanna, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler

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This article investigates the relation between psychoanalysis, feminism and colonialism. The metaphor of "the dark continent," which reveals how modern psychoanalysis has interpreted the "woman" in the light of categories produced in the colonial context, is put under scrutiny through Ranjana Khanna's definition of psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline; while Judith Butler's correlations between desire, performativity and gender, and the unfolding of a "becoming" subject such as "the transexual woman" as theorized by Fabrizia Di Stefano, reflect the complexities of the search for a common term able to recognize all the different political collectivities of feminism. Moving against this theoretical and critical background, the contribution shows the cruciality of looking into the tension between "transnational feminism" and the ethically powerful univocity of the term "woman", as in Simone de Beauvoir's claim to a cultural-historical becoming of the "woman", albeit within the refusal of the idea of an ontologised and substantial feminine identity.

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Dark continents

The well-known metaphor of the "dark continent", that was first passed down by explorer Henry Morton Stanley in reference to "dark" Africa, has provided the image of the woman, namely of female sexuality, as an "impenetrable mystery" since Freud's times to nowadays.[1]

According to Ranjana Khanna, author of *Dark Continents. Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003), the metaphor of the dark continent reveals that modern psychoanalysis has interpreted the "woman" in the light of categories produced in the colonial context (Khanna 2003, ix). As a matter of fact, Khanna defines psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline, insisting on the contingency of Europe's grand narratives (including concepts of the "modern" self, civilization, and nationhood) to coloniality (Khanna 2003, 10). Psychoanalysis is represented as "a form of analysis based in the age of colonialism and constitutive of concepts of the primitive against which the civilizing mission could establish itself" (Khanna 2003, 6).[2]

In postwar France, existential psychoanalysis was unmistakably deemed to arise from colonialism and the Negritude movement,[3] as the anticolonialist forewords that Sartre wrote for Albert Memmi's, Frantz Fanon's, and Leopold Senghor's works aptly clarify (Khanna 2003, 29). In these writings Sartre states that he conceives collective identity as the effect of a situation, a precise context. Every group identity is superimposed; this is the reason why every form of identification "that was not situation-bound and situation-conscious" is doomed to be inauthentic (Khanna 2003, 140).[4]

It is exactly the insistence on the idea of subjectivity, meant as an "effect" of specific social-historical contexts, namely the ethical imperative to configure subjectivity as the expression of a fairer society, that situates Simone de Beauvoir's thought within the ethical question raised by decolonisation and anti-colonialist efforts.

The fact that feminine identity was usually likened to other marginalised identities such as the Black soul and the Jewish character, that were considered fixed identitarian concepts, led de Beauvoir to refuse the idea of an ontologised and substantial feminine identity, and then to insist on how identity is a result of cultural-historical becoming,

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[1] The expression comes from the title of Stanley's account of how he managed to find explorer David Livingstone (Stanley 1878).

[2] On the relationship between colonizer and colonized, and on the epistemological question of knowledge and representation in colonial contexts, see Said 1978. On the complicity between European colonialism and cultural productions (literature, art, philosophical theories, etc.) see Said 1994.

[3] Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Birago Diop were among the black poets and intellectuals, from the Antilles and Africa, who during the Thirties gave birth to the so called Négritude Movement in Paris. Négritude was meant to celebrate pride in blackness and the values of African cultural specificity as well as the poetic epiphany of the lost African motherland. Négritude was especially conceived as a form of cultural and political resistance to colonial assimilation and annihilation (see Chevrier 1986).

[4] For Sartre's preface to Senghor, see Sartre 1948a. In 1945-48 Sartre wrote both *Black Orpheus* and *Anti-Semite and Jew*, two very influential texts for the Negritude Movement as well as for the psychiatric and psychological readings offered by Frantz Fanon and Octave Mannoni, whose enquiries into the psychic strife of the colonized were pivotal in linking psychoanalysis with coloniality. For Sartre's preface to Fanon, see Fanon 1967; for Sartre's preface to Albert Memmi, see Memmi 1965. On Sartre's concepts of collective identity, see Sartre 1948.

instead, which she epitomised in her famous statement: "One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (de Beauvoir 1973, 301).[5]

In the wake of de Beauvoir, and in more recent times, a remarkable number of feminist philosophers within Western thought, ranging from Hélène Cixous to Luce Irigaray, from Julia Kristeva to Sarah Kofman, up to Judith Butler, to mention only a few, have pointed their finger at that phallocentric system that has stressed, for ages, the relationship between woman and body, and the non-transcendence of woman:[6] regarded as mother and wet-nurse, affectivity and emotionality, as a space of domestic immanence and contingency, nature and body, the woman is traditionally far from the masculine "I" that is assumed as the universal subject, defined in terms of spirituality, culture, reason and incorporeality – as Sidonie Smith has aptly noted in her study on the "subjectivity of embodiment" (Smith 1993, 7). The woman is not included in the universality that defines the masculine subject. And if such universal masculine subject is culturally constituted as mind, spirit, reason, namely as something incorporeal, at the same time it has confined the others, among them the woman, to the status of 'body' and corporeality (Smith 1993, 1-17).

Performing genders

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir had already highlighted that woman could be determined and differentiated in relation to man, but the reverse was not thinkable. Woman is non-essential compared to the essential. Man is the Subject, the Absolute, whereas Woman is the Other. After five decades, Sidonie Smith quotes Judith Butler, directly drawing on de Beauvoir's insights, when referring to woman as "other" and "body":

> Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. [...] By defining women as "Other", men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies – a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally – and to make their bodies other than themselves. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine "I" is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other – the body repressed or denied and, then, projected – reemerges for this "I" as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence (Smith 1993, 11).

Clearly, it is a dualistic thought solely featuring two identities, masculine and feminine, that are simply identified according to the kind of body one dwells in, namely according to the different genital organs possessed. However, Judith Butler pushes ahead the reflections on this seeming dualism that has organized Western thought thoroughly, or rather the Judaic-Christian thought, as the philosopher clarifies.

[5] According to de Beauvoir, bad faith, a central concept in French existentialist philosophy, consists of inattributing to the verb "to be" a substantial meaning, whereas the dynamic Hegelian sense of the term, that is to say "to be" in the sense of "to have become" should be underlined. On the idea of "inauthenticity" (from which bad faith results) see De Beauvoir 1973, 20.

[6] Kofman, for instance, re-interprets Freud in the attempt to "unmask" the Freudian image of the woman as a "riddle" (Kofman 1985).

Butler has deeply explored the complexity of the sex/gender relation, where sex is generally meant to be a biological and organic factor, while gender is meant to be the system of cultural significations attributed to a sexed body. In Butler's view, accepting the exclusive existence of two genders, masculine and feminine, firstly implies that there is an absolutely mimetic relationship between sex and gender. The male sexual organ would correspond to the masculine gender, just like the female sexual organ would correspond to the feminine gender. The problem, instead, is much more complex, as Simone de Beauvoir suggested when, in the first pages of *The Second Sex*, she wrote that being of sexually female was not sufficient in order to be a woman, since femininity is a mystery rather than a secretion of ovaries, and it could not be dragged down by a skirt from some sort of Platonic sky. She concluded that if femininity had almost disappeared, it was because it had actually never existed.

This is the crucial intuition that Judith Butler employs when stating that there is no certain, one-to-one correspondence between sexual organ and gender. On the contrary, it is desire that "directs", "pushes" towards a specific gender. The gender towards which desire "directs", has to be "interpreted", just like a character; a role to be "performed".

Gender, then, is conceived as an *ensemble* of cultural meanings that the sexed body acquires, therefore a specific gender cannot be said to derive necessarily from one of the two sexes. Besides, between sexed body and gender there would be a drastic discontinuity. If gender reveals to be a cultural construction, not necessarily depending on the possession of female or male genitals, then the terms *man* and *masculine* can easily signify a female body as much as a male one. Accordingly, *woman* and *feminine* can signify a male body as much as a female one.

Gender, therefore, is first presented as *performativity*, namely a practice, from which human beings result as a series of actions and modes that gradually perform and define their being, rather than a core that pre-exists their agency. In other words, identity shows its performative nature, a practice: "identity is what you do, identity is doing" (De Chiara 2001, 66).

Ultimately, this means that there is no possibility to find a core, an essence of the subject directly deriving from his/her biological sex. There is only a "staging" of the subject, his/her "performance", a "mise-en-scène" of the subject that deploys his/her being in a costant "becoming".

As Ranjana Khanna notices, whereas Western feminism has initially stressed the question of inequality between women and men, and among women themselves, both on the political level and on the level of representativity, in the 1990s there was a remarkable turning point fostered by Lacanian psychoanalysis and centred on the theory of desire, that has proven to be a very useful tool for socio-cultural identification (Khanna 2003, 217). This is the case of *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), where Judith Butler closely dialogues with Lacanian psychoanalysis, thus launching future struggles in *queer* theory.

The encounter with psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the unconscious, sexual drives, hidden desires, repression mechanisms and the body's denied reasons have led to theorisations of the feminine identity that are definitely opposed to those elaborated by a centuries-old patriarchal discourse (aptly termed "phallogocentrism" by French feminist thought during the Seventies).

Judith Butler's thought intertwines Lacanian psychoanalytical intuitions with Michel Foucault's episteme.[7] Butler elaborates a notion of identity as something originating from a very complex dialogue between desire, on the one hand, and *law*, on the other. The *law* Butler refers to, following Michel Foucault, is a system that labels subjects according to their sexualization. Indeed, in Foucault's view, the distinction between sexes represents the main framework pursuing the normalisation and surveillance within the social body. Sexualization would then be uncovered as the law that "normalizes" human bodies, providing the frame to interpret the whole social body and knowledge itself (Butler 1990, 16-34).

Butler notes that identity is governed by normative discourses, practices and institutions that always constitute the subject as a 'subject before the Law'. Consequently, subjectivity cannot be easily accomplished, since it manifests itself as a normative ideal on which an alleged consistency and continuity between sex and gender, desire and sexual practices, is projected. However, this notion of subject or human being – absolutely coinciding with unspoken normative requirements – falls into a crisis with the appearance of modes that are inconsistent and discontinuous compared to the pre-established and culturally internalized gender norms. This is the case, also, of the several forms of homosexuality and transvestism, that are explicit instances of a failed coincidence between the "biological" element, namely the sexual organ, and the manifested gender desire, as Butler remarks in *Gender Trouble* specifically referring to Foucault's studies on the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin (Foucault 1980b; see also Bulter 1990, 94-100).

Interpreting identity as a "performance", "mise-en-scène", "staging" of the subject occurring due to "desire", would be of help for psychoanalysis to overcome its limits.

Ethical questions: the transsexual woman

As underlined by transsexual philosopher Fabrizia Di Stefano in her interesting essay "Perché gli uomini non piangono", published in 2009 in *DWF*, the question which psychoanalysis (since Freud) refuses to answer is: what is a woman, what is a man? There are, actually, other kinds of questions connected to desire and the relation between sexes. Therefore, if the transsexual cannot be a woman *tout-court*, it is first of all because such being is beyond the reach of both psychoanalytical and philosophical formulations. The philosopher confirms that being, as such, is beyond *sense* as far as sex is concerned. Hence, the definition of sense *in itinere* enunciating itself: the transsexual woman.

The famous question posed by Simone de Beauvoir, "what is a woman?", also echoes in Fabrizia Di Stefano's remarks on the current status of psychoanalysis and philosophy, when she reminds us that the free unfolding of a "becoming" subject requires an alert "ethical" attention meant to welcome the many and different tones and inflections of subjectivity (Di Stefano 2009, 38-50). Are we ready, for instance, for an ethos that envisages the free unfolding of transsexuality? What is the high price that transsexual people pay nowadays in terms of psychic and physical violence?

Since the ethical question in feminism is undeniably pivotal, the term "ethics" has proven to be hard to decipher: it ranges from indicating a generic idea of "fairness" to what is acceptable or unacceptable before the Law, therefore regarding locally

[7] Butler refers especially to Foucault 1980a.

recognised behavioural codes. In other cases, the term would coincide with what is political, meant as the specific ground of ethical agency (Khanna 2003, 209). Feminism has always had to privilege a pragmatic vision directly engaged with the contingent needs of women, and that is the reason why ethics and politics are almost synonyms in feminist thought.[8]

In the final part of *Dark Continents*, Khanna describes the melancholic shadow feminism is saturated with, in Europe and in the United States, after the death of de Beauvoir, the mother of modern feminism. The search for a common term able to recognize all the different political collectivities resulted for some in the adoption of so-called "post-feminism"; yet this was also perceived as a "transnational feminism" that got lost in the multiple differences deconstructing the univocity of the term "woman". As a consequence, these recent elaborations often feature some kind of nostalgia for a more "ethical", political and reliable feminism, like the one represented by de Beauvoir (Khanna 2003, 208).[9]

For this reason, in the chapter Khanna dedicates to de Beauvoir, the epigraph quotes the words Luce Irigaray wrote when the French philosopher died in 1986. Irigaray wanted to remind us that Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical and practical work, always pursuing social justice, has left an enormous legacy, mainly consisting in the opening of a wide horizon of liberation for a lot of men and women.[10] This is, indeed, her ethical and libertarian call that still stands though so much time has passed.

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[8] Due to this union between pragmatism and ethics in Simone de Beauvoir's thought as well as in Joan Rivière's theorizations on feminine performativity – Joan Rivière also authored the famous 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" – not to mention, in more recent times, Butler's contributions that refer to Rivière through Lacan's insistence on the "comedic" dimension of sexual ontology – we can detect the intuitions of the lamented "mother of modern feminism". I would also like to mention that Khanna polemically claims that theorizations of performativity did not pay enough attention to the seminal role played by racial difference in this "performance" (Khanna 2003, 48; Rivière 1986).

[9] As Khanna clarifies, feminism became subdivided not only into various forms of feminist activism and feminist theories, but also in several further particular feminisms, all struggling with the limits of a feminist universalism. One of the pivotal questions is how to remain "ethical" when facing gender politics that are not part of one's own context. This fracture within transnational feminism is also a sore spot for international feminist coalitions (Khanna 2003, 209).

[10] From the 1986 essay "Equal or Different"; quoted in Khanna 2003, 207.

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